DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 708 CS 507 902

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TITLE Intercultural Communication Education: An Afrocentric Perspective.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Chicago, IL, April 11-14, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS African Culture; Cultural Context; Cultural Differences; Higher Education; *Intercultural Communication; Interpersonal Communication; Philosophy
IDENTIFIERS *Afrocentrism

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the implications of "Afrocentricity" for intercultural communication education. The paper's task is fourfold. First, it provides the meaning of Afrocentricity as an interpretive and corrective episteme; next, it examines Afrocentricity as context for civility in intercultural communication education; third, it provides a brief review of African philosophy and culture; and finally, the paper synthesizes commentaries of Molefi Asanti, Chinua Achebe, and Dona Richards which buttress the Afrocentric philosophy of respect for others, unity, complementarity, polycentered ways of knowing, rhythm, harmony and communal concern. The paper argues that Afrocentric philosophy is holistic, inclusive, and grounded in complementarity, and that it stands in contrast to Eurocentric premises of "binary opposition" and hegemony. A list of 18 references is attached. (Author/SR)

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION EDUCATION: AN AFROCENTRIC PERSPECTIVE

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Paper presented at Central States Speech Association, Conference Chicago, Ill. 1991

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION EDUCATION: AN AFROCENTRIC PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the implications of "Afrocentricity" for Intercultural Communication Education. The Afrocentric views of Molefi Asante, Chinua Achebe, Dona Richards are provided as praxis. Their lucid commentaries buttress Afrocentric philosophy of respect for others, polycentered ways of knowing, unity, rhythm, harmony and communual concern. It is argued that Afrocentric philosophy is holistic, inclusive and grounded in complementarity. It stands in contrast to Eurocentric premises of "binary opposition" and hegemony. All these offer both philosophical and pedagogical value for Intercultural Communication Education.

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural Communication educators and students have a task for the 21st century. Here is the question: can we provide an authentic education in intercultural communication that is inclusive and respectful of the humanity of Africans and African-Americans without cleaning our templates and flushing out negative Eurocentric-based assumptions and attitudes toward Africa and Africans? The task for intercultural communication educators, particularly those with predominantly Eurocentric/Western world view, is to restore authenticity and civility in our "mindscapes," and to philosophy and pedagogy in intercultural communication. Africa, Africans, African-Americans as well as African culture and philosophy provide us a context or "an opportunity for achieving civility." That civility must permeate our assumptions, how we theorize, teach and practice intercultural communication. This paper reminds me of the book by Cheikh Kane: "Ambiguous Adventure," which according to Chinua Acheba stirs some "philosophical dialogue between the West and Africa." (Achebe 1990, p. 52). As interest in cultural diversity and intercultural communication continues to grow across the United States, the perennial questions in the human sciences specifically in intercultural communication education should be: what does it mean to be human and to be educated in pluralistic America today? Does intercultural communication education in that sense enhance

practical competence in our intercultural communication encounters and experiences? And across the United States does that education enhance authenticity and civility in our assumptions and attitude toward Africa, Africans, African-Americans, and other people of African ancestry? What can we learn about African human values, culture, philosophy by paying attention to the premises of Afrocentricity? This question is directly related to intercultural communication philosophy and pedagogy?

This paper provides a mirror on the past and window to the future of intercultural communication education by taking a look at "the idea of Afrocentricity as template and praxis. The task of the essay is fourfold: first, it provides the meaning of Afrocentricity as an interpretive and corrective episteme, second, Afrocentricity is examined as context for civility in intercultural communication education, third, a brief review is provided on African philosophy and culture, finally, the Afrocentric commentaries of Molefi Asante, Chinua Achebe, Dona Richards are synthesized. Their lucid commentaries buttress the Afrocentric philosophy of respect for others, unity, complementarity, polycentered ways of knowing, rhythm, harmony and communal concern. They also offer both philosophical and pedagogical value for intercultural communication education.

Afrocentricity as Interpretive Praxis

Pioneered by W.E.B. DuBios, Cheikh Anta Diop, David Walker, Ida B. Wells, and George James, Afrocentricity has gained considerable attention over the years through the work of Molefi Asante at Temple University in Philadelphia. Asante (1987) asserts that: "Afrocentricity means...literally placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior (p. 9). African-American culture and history Asante says represent developments in African culture and history, inseparable from place and time. Therefore, "analysis on African American culture that is not based on Afrocentric premises is bound to lead to incorrect conclusions" (p. 10). He argues that a related term called, Afrology, means the Afrocentric study of African concepts, issues, and behaviors and this recognizes three fundamental existential postures one can take with respect to the human condition: feeling, knowing and acting (p. 16). Asante points out the Afro-circular and Euro-linear values at work in social relations between African-Americans and whites in America. He argues that: Afro-circular value seeks to interpret and understand while Euro-linear value seeks to predict and control (p. 18). All these have considerable implications for the role of language and culture in intercultural communication education. Moreover, Asante point out three ideas that deal with the questions of blackness as a philosophical issue rather than a biological one. They are the concepts of Negritude, Authenticity and Afrocentricity. These he points out are centered on the socio

cultural reality of Africa. Negritude encapsulates "the literary and artistic sensibilities of African intellectuals in the field of creative motifs and ethos." So to discern and celebrate African culture and philosophy on humanity we must read the literature on Africans written not from a European/Western perspective but from the premises of Afrocentricity. "Authenticity" underscores the principle of "allowing people to realize themselves through their own history." And "Afrocentricity is the most complete philosophical totalization of the African being-at-the center of his or her existence" (pp. 124-125). Above all, Asante asserts: "an Afrocentric method is concerned with establishing world view about the writing and speaking of oppressed people" (p. 159).

> "A truly Afrocentric rhetoric must oppose the negation in Western culture; it is combative, antagonistic and wholly committed to the propagation of a more humanistic vision of the world...its rhythms are harmonious, discordant only to those who have refused to accept either the truth of themselves or the possibility of other frames of reference. Afrocentric rhetoric, while it is in opposition to the negative in Western culture, allows other cultures to co-exist, and in that particular aspect is substantially different from Western rhetoric. It is neither imperialistic nor oppressive. Therein lies its invigorating power" (Asante 1987, p. 170).

Therefore, "if we are to place the study of any phase of human behavior in its proper setting, we must provide our students with a cultural frame of reference which most of them do not now have" (Boewe and Nichols, 1960, p. 12). Afrocentricity provides a context for civility in intercultural communication education.

Context for Civility in Intercultural Communication Education

Afrocentricity is not about cultural egocentricism and hegemony. It does not deny the humanity of anybody. It is indeed not African to deny or subvert other people's humanity. Afrocentricity is about civility. It seeks to restore civility in our curriculum and epistemology particularly in how we sense, think, feel and interpret the contributions of Africans, African culture and people of African ancestry. Afrocentricity is a "metaphorical text" with a motif that is respectful of "African Episteme" and "Syndesis." Robert Armstrong (1981) defines syndesis as "the basic process of apprehending and constructing the world" (p. 13). As an interpretive and corrective praxis Afrocentricity seeks to restore authenticity in our attitude about Africa, Africans, people of African ancestry and their remarkable contributions to the world. Therefore, as a test of being truly educated, we must by our thoughts and actions join the caravan of civility in higher education today and rethink centuries of Eurocentric caddishness toward Africans, and people of African descent.

Commenting on Twentieth Century Literary Theory, Lambropoulos and Miller (1987) underscore why it is imperative to go beyond the trappings and comfort of Eurocentricism in knowledge claims. They remind us that: "only inquiries that go beyond the boundaries of

British Romanticism, French Symbolism, and American Modernism will enable us to ascertain the validity of theoretical statements." They admit that recent discussions of cultural imperialism (and cultural diversity) have drawn attention to the wider politics of interpretation and the violent power of institutional knowledge. They acknowledge the fact that Western social political, moral, literary theory depends by its very constitution on the premises of Western values which are phallocratic, logocentric, metaphysical, capitalist, etc. (p. xiv). Should these Eurocentric premises be stretched into universalism in intercultural communication education? We need to reconstruct our frames and logics of meaning and action to be inclusive of non-Western perspectives specifically Afrocentricity.

Afrocentricity provides a humanizing vision which restores Africa as a center and root of world civilization. It invites both teachers and students of intercultural communication to look at Africa not as an "object" but as a subject." It therefore provides a foundation for valid interpretation of African culture, philosophy and the contributions of people of African descent to the world. Afrocentricity restores contextual reconstruction of the order of knowledge by challenging the premises of universalism that pervade Eurocentricism. It offers a "critical quilt" for the synthesis of the complex questions about knowledge and power by calling into question the negative and dubious characterization of

Africans/people of African descent by many European writers and philosophers. For over a century, the mindless and "pernicious narcissism" of many Eurocentric writers have perpetuated myths, racism, stereotypes and distortions about Africa, Africans, and people of African ancestry in the diaspora. Spiteful Eurocentric impulses pervade the work of anthropologists, philosophers, explorers, literary theorists, even missionaries and others. A full account of the arrogant and uncivil comments of the writers about Africa and Africans is not within the scope of this paper. But for the sake of curiosity I invite both students and teachers of intercultural communication to see the work of this two philosophers: Hegel, in "Philosophy of History" and David Hume's essay entitled, "Of National Character." Also revealing improbity are the accounts of explorers, notably Richard Burton and Samuel Baker. Asante (1988) points out that racial power had been the central idea in European thought since Bartholomew Las Casas. It dominated every major philosopher of Europe: Darwin, Wagner, Nietzsche, and even Marx. These Europeans, Asante argues, may have differed in their conceptualizations of race power, but none questioned the central idea itself (p. 11). The famous European fiction writer, Joseph Conrad is indeed a doyen of the morbid Eurocentric race to debase Africa. His book: Heart of Darkness easily qualifies for the trophy of African negation. Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is the subject of Afrocentric commentary by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe in his book: Hopes

and Impediments (1990). Achebe asserts that there is the need - in "Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations... in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (pp. 2-3). Germane at this point is the commentary by D'Souza (1991) in the Atlanta Monthly essay entitled: "Illiberal Education." Referring to the students protest in 1988 for non-Western curriculum at Stanford University, D'Souza points out that: "Western culture implacably hostile to blacks and other ethnic minorities...." He reminds us that: "the real issue in the debate on what canon undergraduates should study is the assumption that "Western values are inherently oppressive."

One wonders from all these if the centuries of Eurocentric racism toward Africans and African-Americans is why African human values, philosophy and culture are rarely mentioned in most of our introductory textbooks on intercultural communication? Commenting on the "Structures of Discourse and Structures of Power" van Dijk (1989, p. 30) points out that: "Most textbooks reproduce..., ethnocentric, or racist view of the world - of minority groups." (Klein, 1986; Milner, 1983; Preiswerk, 1980; van Dijk, 1987). "Minority groups and their history and culture tend to be ignored and a few stereotypical cultural differences are emphasized... Although cultural differentiation and pride may be a feature of all or most groups, cultures or countries, Western or white dominance is shown through special attention to superior

technology, culture and political system." Yet, "unlike most other types of texts, textbooks are obligatory reading for many people, which is a second major condition of their power. Together with instructional dialogues, textbooks are used extensively by citizens during their formal education. The knowledge and attitudes expressed and conveyed by such learning materials, reflect a dominant consensus, if not the interest of the most powerful groups and institutions of societies," (van Dijk, 1989, p. 48). Moreover, commenting on "textbook flaws" the Council on Interracial Books (1977) points out that: while, it is true that newer texts do include more information about Black people, this is usually offered from a white perspective and barely touches upon Black oppression." The council points out centuries of stereotypes, distortions, omissions in textbooks and asserts: "African, as well as European culture forms an integral part of the U.S. heritage" (p. 18).

What is imperative from all these for both students and intercultural communication educators is the need to understand and assess the relationship between discourse and social power. Van Dijk (1989) has provided a foundation for insight into the ways power is enacted, expressed, described, concealed, or legitimated by text and talk in the social context. This should draw our attention to the role of ideology in social cognition. This formulation enables us to build the indispensable theoretical bridge between societal power of classes, groups, or institutions

at the macro level of analysis and the enactment of power in interaction and discourse at the social micro level (pp. 18-59).

What follows from here on is a brief review of some important aspects of African philosophy and culture that are germane for intercultural education. Richard Wright (1979) calls our attention to three fundamental reasons we ought to pay attention to African philosophy:

> (1) the thought of the African people is intrisically valuable and should be studied for that reason; (2) it is important to the history of ideas that we discover and understand the relation between (or influence of) African thought and the thought of the Western world. For if Western civilization had its origin on the African continent, as many anthropologists now argue, the correct pattern of intellectual development, the proper relationship of influences will only become clearer as we begin to understand the basis and direction of that direction; (3) it is important in understanding practical affairs that we clearly delineate their underlying philosophical motivation (pp. 26-27).

Also, Keita (1979) has explored "The African Philosophical Tradition" and presents evidence that a sufficiently firm literate philosophical tradition had existed in Africa since ancient times and that this tradition is of sufficient intellectual sophistication to warrant serious analysis. Keita points out that a genuine African philosophy (like, Chinese, European or Indian philosophy) should constitute the periods of Africa's most articulate effort through its history. African philosophical tradition is divided into three distinct phases: (1) classical, (2) medieval and (3) modern (p. 35-36).

African Culture, Philosophy and Intercultural Communication Education

Reflecting on "Afrocentricity and Culture," Asante (1988) points out that Afrocentric Motif is based upon three traditional values: harmony with nature, humaneness, and rhythm. He cites DuBois, who saw in African culture the unfounding desire for unity, wholeness and harmony (p. 18). Commenting on Africa's contribution to world culture, Claudia Zaslavsky points out that Western researchers are struck by the contrast in moral outlook between African culture and those of the West. She cites A. C. Mundy-Castle's report on "psychology" which says:

> "African societies) promote social integration, friendliness, respect for others, serenity, social ease and a capacity for pleasure... In contrast the (Western) supertechnological societies thrive on individual assertiveness and aggressive competition. (She expresses the hope that) the wide world may benefit from its integration with Africa, by constructive modulation of aggressive and receptive tendencies, giving rise to a nobler and more harmonious expression of human intelligence." (Zaslavsky, 1973, p. 279).

Afrocentric Motif Asante reminds us assumes that the mind and matter, spirit and fact, truth and opinion are all aspects or dimensions of one vital process. All things are integrated with culture and nature. All intelligence is accepted as containing the God-force. Afrocentric philosophy views art, science, medicine, engineering and literature as co-extensive with humanism and sensitivity (Asante, 1988, p. 38). This provides useful context for creating, building, and maintaining meaningful relationships in a pluralistic world.

Achebe on Complementarity and Polycentered Episteme

The conversation between Bill Moyers (1989, pp. 333-336) and Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian novelist for the television series "A World of Ideas," reveals core Afrocentric philosophy of complementarity and polycentered ways of knowing. In the conversation, Moyers begins with this question:

> "There's a proverb in your tradition that says, wherever something stands, something else will stand beside it. How do you interpret that?"

Responding to Moyer's question on whether it is necessary to hold the notion of more than God, Achebe says:

> "Yes, if there is one God, fine. There will be others as well. If there is one point of view, fine. There will be a second point of view."

Achebe points out that this is where the first conflict with the missionaries came. The missionaries came with the idea of one way, one truth, one life. Complementarity was hardly the mind set of the missionaries. Nigerians, at the time, considered this so extreme, so fanatical, that they recoiled from it. Above all, Moyers' conversation with Achebe reveals the Afrocentric philosophy of wholeness, empathy ant the wisdom of empowerment in which the strong nation should learn to listen to the weak and the oppressed. Toward the end of the conversation, Moyers cites a summary passage in one of Achebe's books: Anthills of the Savannah which says,

> "Whatever you are is never enough. You must find a way to accept something, however small, from the other to make you whole and to save you from the mortal sin of righteousness and extremism."

Following this, Moyers ponders: so there is something that the strong can take from the weak? Achebe says yes.

> "Seeing the world from the position of the weak person is a great education. If we had enough imagination to put ourselves in the shoes of the person we oppress, things would begin to happen. So, it is important that we develop the ability to listen to the weak. Not only Africa--the strong must listen to the weak."

The Afrocentric Motif of inclusivity, complementarity, wholeness, communal concern and morality stand in contrast to the "binary opposition" which describes Eurocentrism. Binary opposition, hegemony, vertical ordering of reality, as well as democratic capitalist politics and power are deeply rooted in Eurocentric science and philosophy.

The African according to Laude (1971) does not place him/herself at the center of the cosmos. For the Dogon and Bambara, a person is "the seed of the universe." He/she is the network of relationships woven among all being by the creator (p. 243). Citing Cheikh Anta Diop and Leopold Senghor, Laude stresses the need to understand African reality in terms of rhythm. Rhythm for an African is "the architecture of being, the internal dynamism that shapes him/her, the system of life waves, waves emitted directly toward others, it is expression of vital force. African philosophy is governed by dynamic vitalism. This fact Laude points out is confirmed by detailed knowledge about different ethnic groups. African philosophy he argues, must not be interpreted in the light of modern Western metaphysical

systems. Dionysus is the hidden god of Africa: the god who dances, who possesses and inspires the voice and the poetic word, the god who provisionally annihilates individual will in order to better strengthen life. African civilizations are civilizations of the dance and the word. The essential features of African life and thought relate very well to rhythm (pp. 243-244).

African Spirituality and Intercultural Communication

Richards (1985) has provided lucid reflections on African-American spirituality, which provides insight into the fact that it is the depth and strength of African-American spirituality, humanism and vitality which define the responses of African-Americans to Western culture. That response she asserts: "is universally African" (p. 207). Furthermore, she points out that "The African universe is conceived as a unified spiritual totality. We speak of the Universe as Cosmos, and we mean that all being is organically interrelated and interdependent. The Swahili speak of utaratibu wa kutizama dunia (the way of the world). The Western/European materialized universe does not yield cosmos. The essence of African cosmos is spiritual reality; that is its fundamental nature, its primary essence. But realities are not conceived as being in irreconcilable opposition, as they are in the West, and spirit is not separate from matter. Both spiritual and material being are necessary in order for there to be a meaningful reality" (p. 210). Therefore:

> To the African...the universe is made up of complementary pairs. These pairs are elements or principles of reality which are interdependent and necessary to each other, in a unified system.... The determining mode of African World view is harmony. The goal is to discover the point of harmonious interaction, in the African world view the human and the divine are not hopelessly separated, as they are in Western theology where the divine is defined as the negation of all that is human...In Africa the human is divine. To the African the sacred and the profane are close and can be experienced as unity. All this is so because of the multidimensional nature of the African universe. (Richards, 1985, p. 211)

When studying African thought we must rely on stories, oral tradition, ritual, social institutions as purveyors of thought. These he says serve as the data for analysis of African philosophical thought, so that when taken together with the analytical writings of other scholars, we have a substantial basis for our studies (Wright, 1979, p. 29).

Conclusion

Afrocentricity provides us with a holistic perspective on the complementarity of different cultures and groups of human beings. Transcending mono-cultural Eurocentrism, it offers a different set of approaches to the way diverse populations communicate, behave and think need to be developed by educators. Afrocentricity is for the true diversity in learning and the affirmation of the egalitarian values associated with authentic pluralism and multiculturalism. It is imperative that both students and educators in intercultural communication deal with debilitating misconceptions about people of color, and operate within a framework of equal respect and appreciation for the similarities and differences among groups. Herein lies the redeeming value of the Afrocentric method that we should incorporate in our curriculum.

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